

## Can Perfectionism Withstand the Acknowledgment of Slavery?

Jeff Frank

*Sweet Briar College*

Stanley Cavell's formulation of Emersonian moral perfectionism is receiving a good deal of attention in our field.<sup>1</sup> While champions of his work are quick to point to the inclusiveness of perfectionism — it is an ideal specifically created to be responsive to our best, broadest, and most democratic understandings of America — critics (and critical aspects of even the most sympathetic readers) have reason to question the nature of Cavell's list of perfectionist texts cited in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*.<sup>2</sup> The list does not include the work of one writer of color, and only one work deals explicitly with what is in many ways *the* American problem, slavery. This fact, of itself, is not a criticism of Cavell, his philosophy, or the appropriateness of his thinking for (American) education. But, if a reader does find this admission or oversight (Cavell might call it — in certain moods — repression) enough to cast some doubt on perfectionism's fittingness as a specifically American philosophy of education, it seems right to look for ways of responding to this doubt. In order to respond to my own doubts about Cavell's oversight, I turn to the one work Cavell cites that focuses on slavery — Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* — and explore how this work — specifically its representation of slavery — relates to the work of Cavell's representative perfectionist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. This may seem like an overly circuitous, if not something of a far-fetched, undertaking. But — and only what follows can serve as adequate justification of the effort — I don't think this is the case. Instead, I think it is important to test if Cavell's perfectionism can be responsive to America's history of slavery, and the most sympathetic way of doing this — as I see it — is by working with a text that Cavell recognizes as perfectionist, and that deals explicitly with slavery.<sup>3</sup>

### EMERSON'S DEVIL AND HUCK'S HELL: PERFECTIONISM AS SELF-RELIANCE

*Huckleberry Finn* is a notoriously difficult book. Two aspects of the novel have received a great deal of polarizing critical attention: the novel's representation of race and slavery, and the novel's ending. On race and slavery, some readers see the work as deeply racist, while others see Twain — even as he is constrained in many ways by his time and position in society — as managing to create a work that is strongly anti-racist. On the novel's ending, readers like Ernest Hemingway see Huck's admission that he will go to hell rather than turn Jim in as the actual ending of the novel (“The rest is just cheating”), a second group of critics see the final chapters of the novel as deeply flawed and indicative of Twain's failure to find an ending, while another group of critics see the ending — although challenging — as central to the novel and expressive of some of Twain's most trenchant criticisms of slavery and reconstruction. I introduce these interpretative controversies because I think the two are closely related — how we read the ending should play a role in how we view the novel's understanding of race, racism, and slavery — and because I

think — contra Hemingway — that it is an interpretive cheat to end the novel before Huck reunites with Tom Sawyer on the Phelps farm.<sup>4</sup> Stating this is important, because if we read with Hemingway — as I do below — we are given one way of seeing the significance of the novel as a perfectionist text that addresses slavery, but if we read the novel as it is written, we will get a very different picture of *Huckleberry Finn*, perfectionism, and slavery.

If we take Hemingway's suggestion seriously, we are given a nice interpretive shortcut from Twain to Emerson and Cavell. When Huck is considering whether he should turn Jim in — what he takes to be the socially responsible and morally good thing to do — or help him escape, Huck famously concludes his deliberation with: "All right, then, I'll go to hell."<sup>5</sup> Huck can't do what he takes to be the right thing, because he remembers everything that Jim did for him, and feels that their relationship trumps any other consideration he can muster. What Huck takes to be his descent into immorality ("I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog."<sup>6</sup>) readers can see as Huck freeing himself from falsifying forms of civilization and recovering his better self.<sup>7</sup> If we take this moment to be the end of the novel, then we can clearly see the perfectionist implications. Through his relationship with Jim and what he learns from it, Huck is able to turn away from society and so recover his better self. In achieving his better self, he stands as a rebuke to his society, offering it an education in how it can realize its own ideals and so attain its better state.

What is so interesting about this interpretation is that it offers a striking echo of one of Emerson's most famous paragraphs, a paragraph that Cavell returns to throughout his writing on perfectionism. The quotation begins,

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested, — "But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.<sup>8</sup>

Emerson, like Huck, makes a choice to act against social conventions if the conventions are contrary to his constitution. By using the term "constitution" in place of another term — for example, character — Emerson seems to be drawing a strong connection between his act of self-reliance and the founding of America. Just as the individual needs to risk transgressive acts if she is to live up to her better self, so too must the nation. The founding of America is not an accomplished fact. Instead, it must always work toward its better ideals: the act of founding is in the movement; just as the perfectionist self is realized through the pursuit of the unattained but attainable self.<sup>9</sup>

If we stop here, we get one picture of perfectionism. The individual, in acting against conformity, risks becoming an outcast — a follower of the devil, a future inhabitant of hell — in order to achieve her better self. In the process of turning against conformity and toward the work perfectionism calls for, the individual simultaneously renews the promise of America by participating in its founding. This picture of perfectionism is inspiring in its way, but it is also a bit too self-congratulatory. Twain knows that Huck isn't going to find himself in hell for helping Jim, just as it seems that Emerson doesn't fully believe that he will ever be ostracized by his society if he follows the directives of his better self.<sup>10</sup> By placing the risk of action at so far a remove from lived experience, a new risk emerges. Thinking on the level of the momentous, it is possible to lose sight of the moral.<sup>11</sup> Although Hemingway may have missed this aspect of *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain didn't, and so the novel descends into the horrors of Jim's imprisonment on Phelps farm. Similarly, the self-assurance of Emerson's paragraph ends with the admission that Emerson does in fact conform to the expectations of his society, despite the intentions of his better self. The inspirational and the momentous side of perfectionism needs to survive the confrontation with everyday life, a life marked by slavery and its continued significance.

#### HUCK AND JIM: IS PERFECTIONIST FRIENDSHIP POSSIBLE?

Before returning to *Huckleberry Finn*, we can learn a good deal about the difficulty slavery poses for perfectionism by continuing the paragraph quoted above. What starts in confident assertion ends in an admission of moral failure. Importantly, what stands between a strong statement of self-reliance and an expression of guilt is the presence of slavery.<sup>12</sup> A little after the above quote ends, Emerson picks up,

If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, "Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home." Rough and graceless would be such greeting, but truth is handsomer than the affectation of love ... do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies; — though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.<sup>13</sup>

I think this is a fascinating passage, and particularly striking is Emerson's thinking on responsibility that emerges toward the end of the paragraph. While we can read Emerson's dismissal of his obligation to help the poor as callous — and we sense that he rebukes himself for this and this contributes to his decision to give the dollar — we can also see it as a gesture toward a more subtle understanding of perfectionism. With the image of the abolitionist and the slave in mind, it is hard not to see Emerson developing a strange thing: something like a spiritual slave auction, where men are

“bought and sold” based on mutual interest and affinity. We belong to one another — we accrue responsibilities for and to one another — not in the terms of the slave auction — money, race, force, violence — but in the terms of perfectionist friendship — conversation, shared ends, teaching, and learning. While Emerson is normally quite comfortable asserting these ends, when he draws up the ideals of perfectionist friendship right next to the slave auction, he sees the deep rent in the fabric of American social life, and so he has to give the dollar, and in so doing we can interpret him as acknowledging the limitations of perfectionism in the face of slavery. This is not to say that Emerson doesn’t come back from this acknowledgment. But, we have to wonder — it is in some ways the purpose of this essay to wonder — at what cost does Emerson draw a circle around it?

To make this point less metaphorically, Emerson sees perfectionist friendship in terms of a community of equals, each aspiring to reach his and her unattained yet attainable self, and in the process building out our new yet unapproachable America. We see this ideal illustrated beautifully in Cavell’s *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. In the films Cavell writes about, we watch as a man and a woman find a way to co-create the terms of a marriage that they both assent to as a marriage that allows them to become — together — their better. Unfortunately, as Cavell notes, the sample from these films is not representative of American diversity, and the ideal of remarriage implies a foundation of mutual respect that the couple can work from. When we push these films up against the existence of slavery, we see the ideal of remarriage does not apply, because the world of slaves and slaveholders (the world depicted in *Huckleberry Finn*) looks nothing like the world of *The Philadelphia Story*.

We might wish to contest this by looking at the relationship Jim and Huck form. If we start our examination of this friendship at the time Huck finds Jim on Jackson’s Island — that is, after Huck stages his own death, and Jim escapes from Miss Watson — then we see how the relationship develops from a sense of joy and relief — Huck and Jim are genuinely happy to see each other — moves through a moment of remorse on Huck’s part — wanting to trick Jim, he places a dead rattlesnake near where Jim sleeps: Jim gets bitten by the snake’s partner — to a moment of deep fatherly care on Jim’s part — keeping the death of Huck’s father in the sordid floating house from Huck — and continuing on the river where Jim and Huck develop a deep sense of attachment to — and responsibility for — each other. Against the background of the relationship that the two form, Huck’s decision to risk damnation for Jim makes sense. Even still, we have to hesitate before we call what Jim and Huck have built along the river a friendship, especially a perfectionist one. Sadly, Huck may genuinely love Jim, but he does not respect him. We see this — in brutal, drawn out detail — as Huck and Tom torture Jim in the final chapters of the novel. While Huck does voice some objections to Tom’s treatment of Jim, Huck ultimately defers to Tom’s better — whiter, more European judgment (we see this in Tom’s insistence of teaching Jim and Huck the ways of his novels) — and (in a terrible echo of Jackson’s Island) allows Tom to torture Jim with a “rattlesnake.” When Huck assents to this, we see that what happened on the river is undone in

significant ways. Huck ends the novel where he began — willing to play tricks on the lovable, but ultimately subhuman Jim — and Jim becomes the ex-slaveholder’s fantasy — the loveable and grateful ex-slave, willing to endure more hardships if it pleases and appeases the white man.

If we are willing to make an attempt to show how this ending — the ending where Huck’s perfectionist quest is ended in the face of his inability to maintain a relationship with Jim — is nonetheless perfectionist, where can we turn? I am not sure the novel holds out much hope. While many of the characters Huck meets exhibit a tremendous amount of fellow feeling and a great willingness to offer their homes to a “stranger,” we see that Jim is never given the standing of the stranger; he is always treated as the word that recurs with almost hyperbolic frequency in the novel. Twain, it would seem, can imagine a world where whites will feel guilt about their cruelty toward black men and women, but he cannot seem to imagine — at least in this novel — a world where black and white men and women will ever share a mutual respect that will develop into friendship. While many will read this as Twain’s failing — and so see the ending as flawed — I don’t think this is the case. Rather, the ending states the problem that we have still not fully been able to contend with: perfectionism — in the sense of the individual attempting to realize her better self, and the nation aspiring to realize its better state — is impossible without perfectionist friendship, and given our history of slavery, we cannot imagine what a truly integrated future looks like, and so cannot imagine perfectionist friendship between blacks and whites occurring on a large scale. Instead, and this is a mark of the recurring interest in *Huckleberry Finn* — America is caught in a fantasy that is chronicled by Twain, a fantasy that includes: treating the free Jim not as a slave, but a prisoner who needs to be rescued by the heroic efforts of the white man; treating the slave with endless brutality, but somehow assured that the slave loves us and will be grateful to us when we grudgingly recognize that the slave might deserve some of the rights that we take for granted as our white birthright.

While I think *Huckleberry Finn* does end on this note — exposing American fantasies that preclude the possibility of Emersonian moral perfectionism<sup>14</sup> — I don’t think we should see it as the final word on perfectionism. Instead — and this returns us to the nagging problem of Cavell’s reading list — the perfectionist conversation stands in need of more voices. As Robert Gooding-Williams notes, Cavell has ignored “a tradition of philosophical thought — of, precisely, African American philosophical thought — that has intermittently heard and responded to Emerson’s call.”<sup>15</sup> We need only look to W.E.B. Du Bois to begin appreciating what we have to learn from a more expansive vision of perfectionism. In chapter nine of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes,

Human advancement is not a mere question of almsgiving, but rather of sympathy and cooperation among classes who would scorn charity. And here is a land where, in the higher walks of life, in all the higher striving for the good and noble and true, the color-line comes to separate natural friends and coworkers.<sup>16</sup>

We hear in these lines a reiteration of Emerson’s call for perfectionist friendship (“There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold”),

but we see in Du Bois an insistence that perfectionist friendship will never exist so long as the color-line serves to keep natural friends and coworkers apart. In addressing the color-line directly, by not letting himself prematurely draw the next circle until America has squarely faced its history of slavery, Du Bois does perfectionism a great service. *The Souls of Black Folk* serves as a reminder that perfectionism is dependent on allowing “natural friends” who share a “spiritual affinity” to become “coworkers” in intellectual and social projects. This will never happen if we refuse to face the history of slavery and the continued reality of segregation and racism that are pervasive in American life.

One step in this direction — albeit a minor one — is to change the construction of our perfectionist city of words. We will never realize our better self or achieve the promise of America if we fail to more fully acknowledge the significance of slavery and its legacy for perfectionism. And, we will never get to that acknowledgement if we fail to read works that attempt to find a language for a past we would rather repress. Without this language, we will never create a future where we will be able to reach across the color-line to find perfectionist friends.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The one obvious implication of this essay is that we should seek to make the perfectionist conversation more expansive by including works that try to find a language for our terrible history of slavery. This call for inclusiveness should not be seen as arbitrary, but necessary. We will never achieve our better self or a better state if we continue to avoid an acknowledgment of slavery and its vast and various implications. While I take this to be the obvious lesson of this essay, I think a more subtle point emerges as well. The idea of canon formation is still a vexed issue in education. As recent decisions by the Texas State School Board make clear, there are many Americans who would downplay — if not ignore outright — the significance of slavery in America’s history, cultures, and literatures. While strategies to make curriculum more inclusive that are dependent on intellectual “almsgiving” (to use Du Bois language above) — that is, including works by writers of color out of a sense of duty or a feeling of coercion — seem destined to end in failure and embarrassment, an argument based on perfectionism might stand on a better foundation. As I hope to have shown in this essay, we cannot afford to ignore slavery if we are to keep the promise of perfectionism a live option. More, when we do make the attempt to find our perfectionist friends across the color-line, our initial sense of the arbitrary — that is, that the color-line is an arbitrary and not a constitutive fact of our life together in America — will give way to a sense of shame at our own limitations. Instead of continuing our perfectionist conversations in the precincts of the city of words that we are most comfortable in, we will find that our perfectionist education will begin anew when we open ourselves up to perfectionist writers who challenge our sense of self and our understanding of our national identity through a confrontation with slavery and its manifold and continuing effects.

---

1. See, for example, Naoko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Paul Standish, “Uncommon Schools:

Stanley Cavell and the Teaching of *Walden*,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25 (2006): 145–57; Paul Standish, “In Her Own Voice: Convention, Conversation, Criteria,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, no. 1 (2004): 91–106; Paul Standish, “Democratic Participation and the Body Politic,” *Educational Theory* 55, no. 4 (2005): 371–84; Paul Standish, “Postmodernism and the Education of the Whole Person,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 121–35; and David Granger, “Recovering the Everyday: John Dewey as an Emersonian Pragmatist,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 3 (1998): 331–49.

2. For an example of this type of reading, see Jack Turner, “Awakening to Race: Ralph Ellison and Democratic Individuality,” *Political Theory* 36, no. 5 (2008): 655–82.

3. Another interesting angle that one can take in relation to Cavell’s educational significance as it relates to race, see David Granger, “Somaesthetics and Racism: Toward an Embodied Pedagogy of Difference,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 3 (2010): 69–81. This essay builds from a Deweyan critique of Cavell’s relationship to embodiment. For more, see David Granger, “Towards an Embodied Poetics of the Self: Personal Renewal in Dewey and Cavell,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20, no. 2 (2001): 107–24.

4. For a strong rationale for reading the novel this way, see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 54–57.

5. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 284, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>.

6. *Ibid.*, 285.

7. Recovering, not in the sense of finding some preexisting self, but in the case of creating one’s better self through the acknowledgment of one’s limited state. For a good discussion of this aspect of Cavell’s thinking, see Stanley Bates “Stanley Cavell and Ethics,” in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays First Series*, <http://www.rwe.org>.

9. For a more in-depth discussion of America in Cavell’s thought, see James Conant, “Cavell and the Concept of America,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For an excellent discussion of the significance of movement and transition, see Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism and American Literary Modernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

10. We can see this illustrated in his confident assertion that when he speaks most privately he will in fact prove most representative.

11. Someone who consistently explores this line of thinking in her work is Judith Shklar. Her *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984) and *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990) are wonderful antidotes to the debased form of perfectionism I am sketching here.

12. For a more detailed discussion of Emerson’s thinking on slavery, see Jack Turner, “Emerson, Slavery, and Citizenship,” *Raritan* 28, no. 2 (2008): 127–46.

13. Emerson, “Self-Reliance.”

14. For a very interesting look at how the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* responds to — and criticizes — Emerson’s work, see Douglas Anderson, “Huckleberry Finn and Emerson’s ‘Concord Hymn,’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40, no. 1 (1985): 43–60.

15. Robert Gooding-Williams, “Aesthetics and Receptivity: Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire,” in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 262. In response, Cavell writes, “I have no defense against my having not tried to listen to and respond to it” (*Ibid.*, 301).

16. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 130, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public>.